TAPE NO. 46

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NARRATOR B. Bettencourt

INTERVIEWER P. Lotz

PLACE Hist. Museum

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Interview with Boyd Bettencourt
Date of Interview: Jan. 11, 1987, SYV Historical Museum
Interviewer: Phyllis Lotz
Transcriber: Phyllis Lotz

Begin Tape 1, Side 1

PL: Introduction

Could we begin with a history of the winery?

Mr. B: Sure, fine, actually we live at the winery, our family is there and our boy Lee and our two grandchildren. So we have been there a long time in that Clare's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Archie Hunt bought the place in 1923 and moved there. It goes back further than that I guess because Mrs. Hunt was born and raised in the county and so was Mr. Hunt, so they had been here for a long, long time. This land we live on, when they came here and shortly after that they developed it into a dairy and they had a diary farm for many, many years and thats how I got involved in 1946 when I came here after World War II and college and went to work as the dairy superintendant. Next door to us on the adjouning property were Mr. and Mrs. Harold (Brick) Buell. In 1948 Mr. and Mrs. G.Gifford Davidge came up from Pasadena looking for a placae to live here and they bought the Buell property in 1948. The Davidges moved here with their four children, Dean, Sam, Susan, and Bill. Shortly after they moved here with his inexperience as a farmer and with my experience as a farmer and living next door we soon got together and decided that it would be better to do some of these things together. So we have been partners for many, many years in the farming

operation, growing tomatoes, sugar beets, etc, and these kinds of things. Then along in the late 1960's taxes got quite high and we were looking for other things to do with some of our land, that would produce more income that we could afford to keep this land and stay. Some of the land was with dry farming, very low income from it and high taxes and we couldn't see continuing on that way. We had to do something else. One day Mr. Davidge came over to my place which he did every day as we were very close friends and suggested that the grape and wine industry seemed to be thriving in California and would it be good for us. Grapes did quite well on not the best land and so we might want to try it. I didn't think alot of the idea to tell you the truth, it was his idea but I did listen to him because I had a lot of respect for him. I wanted to give him a good answer so we started investigating what could be done as a possibility of growing grapes. I had a couple of very good friends who lived in the San Joaquin Valley and were in grapes all their lives, we had gone to college together up at Davis and had gotten to know each other very well so I called them and asked them about growing grapes in the Santa Ynez Valley. By coinsidence they were wanting to move out of the Delano area and get into high type grape varieties and were looking all along the coast because they felt in their minds after trips to Europe and their contact with the University of California at Davis that it was not just soil that made good grapes

or just climate and all along this coast there should be good places other than Napa County or Sonoma to grow grapes. They had tried to collect weather records as best they could and the place with the best records were airplrts. The airports have more weather records than any one else so I did get records over here at our airport, they were a little sketchy but good. At least some indication that of what the weather was like on a yearly basis. My friends said that with those records and the knowledge of growing grapes that this area was probably the best place that they had encountered, outside of Napa.

PL: Where were you going to get the plants to use?

Mr. B: We acquired them from root stock from the U.of C. and from ? Nielsen and Willie De Matera from Santa Maria. We planted on their own roots which means we took a cutting from another plant and put it in the ground and so that one plant could produce a hundred new plants and they would be exactly the same as the mother plant. This saves planting from seed, and the variety produces very true because it was just an extension of the same plant. That's the way we started these varieties.

PL: Do you replant, do the vines get old?

Mr. B: Yes, there is a certain amount of mortality in the vineyard but it is estimated by old timers that the vineyard will last up to 75 years. That does not mean

that every plant will last that long, some of the plants have to reproduced as they are killed by gophers, or disease but there is a small percentage and those spaces are filled in by layering. We take a long cane from the vine next door and run it over and bury it in the empty space in about 18 inches of soil and in a year cut it off from the mother plant and it becomes a plant of its own. That way the first year the mother plant feeds and supports the new one. A new plant would have an awful time competing in the crowded vineyard. Some of these plants will become 75 year old plants.

PL: What about diseases?

Mr. B: Not here. There are places in the world that very severe diseases cause a lot of trouble. Tofaloxica kills plants and cuts production way down but here we are able to avoid that. In those areas where this disease happens, they plant a root stock that has resistance but here we don't have to do that.

PL: Tell me about Mr. Brander?

Mr. B: Mr Brander is a young man who came to us in about 1975, he had graduated from U.of C., Davis. He was a graduated chemist who became interested in wine and became a winemaker. He has an excellent palate, he had an excellent background in education and so he did an excellent job as our first winemaker and got us off to a

good start.

Since that time he has branched out and now has a winery of his own on Refugio, in the Los Olivos area. We have a new winemaker now, his name is Michael Brown, he comes from Australia and is an excellent man, a graduate of Davis. We seems to follow along that line as my wife, Clare and I graduated from Davis and so did Clare's father, Archie Hunt. Davis is a very good place for us. Mike does an excellent job. Last year he garnered 80 medals with his wine in competition around the state.

PL: You mentioned palate, what does that mean?

Mr. B: This is a natural talent of a very good winemaker that is almost essential to be really successful. This is something that can be acquired after tasting many, many wines but it is something that they are born with. It does not come from education, it comes from doing. In the process of making the wine it does not taste that good,(laughter) they have to know from taste that things are going along well in the process, that with tasting they know if there are problems in the wine. These are signals that you can not fine out any other way. Also to determine what is the best blend of some of these grapes when they are mixed together and what to come up with. The most important part of the palate testing is the making of the wine, while it is inmature and not yet finished and to recognize the good things, what should be

done to finish this into a good wine.

PL: Did you have problems in the beginning?

Mr. B> Well yes, I have to say that we have made mistakes, we made some recently. We had some people working around the winery and one time we had an excellent Chardonnay, a wine which was one of our best wines that we had ever made. We also had made a light white wine from the red grapes called a Blanco Cabernet and one of the workers was supposed to be pumping the wine out of one tank and putting it in an empty vat, but he got mixed up a little and pumped the white into the Chardonnay so we had a mixture of those two wines, now it was an excellent wine but it was not saleable because we had no name, no variety, it was a mix. It sold out and people enjoyed it and we called it just a white wine. So there are mistakes but not any great ones. We are very fortunate in our advisors, people that have prevented us from making mistakes, I think that is the reason that Gif Davidge and I have been successful, we have listened to people that say don't do this because you might have trouble, or don't do that. These people pointed out all their past mistakes so it was easier for us. We were fortunate in that.

PL: What is a wonderful attitude, that others in your business want to help you?

Mr. B: Yes, in our business I would say tiat it's one of the

better businesses as far as public relations go, working together, helping each other even though we are in competetion. The Gainey, Firestone, Zaca Mesa, and others every one of them, we are very friendly and willing to help each other. Assist each other not only from the standpoint of friends but we havae come to realize from a hard business standpoint that we all have to survive and we have to do well to make this area a well recognized area so what ever we do to help each other helps us too.

PL: It seems to me that the winery is called upon monthly for benefits, fund-raisers, etc,to donate wines, have tasting parties, how do you handle that?

Mr. B: Yes, It does get costly, I don't think people realize that it takes time and wine and all those things, we don't mind doing this and like to do it for worthy events, we enjoy exposing our wines to people but to just serve it at a party or at a political event is really not helpful to us. I don't know why the wine industry was picked out to do this, they don't do this with other beverage companies it seems like the wine people are expected to do this. We don't resist it entirely but try to pick and choose and make people think ahead of how we can all benefit.

PL: Explain how a red grape wine can be sold as a white wine?

Mr. B: It is the making of the wine itself. Two things...one is the color of the grape, the color is nearly all in the

skin and so if a grape is crushed, squeezed, pressed, the juice is pressed off immediately, then it comes out almost white from any grape, if it does not stay on the skin very long it will come out white. The other thing is in the process of making wine, red wines are crushed and pumped with the skins on. Everything of the grape is put into the tank and fermented. With the white wine the juice is squeezed off until only the juice is fermented so that when we make it, a blush wine or pink or a white wine or any degree of that from a red grape we make it just like we would a white wine, we press it off, put it in a tank and ferment it, only the juice and there are many of them made nowadays. We were the front-runner of doing that here in the valley if the wine can be sold in a year or so. It is advantages to us not to store the wine long. A red wine has to be stored, it has tannens from this way of making the wine or fermenting on the skins and those tannens have to be aged out by putting it in oak wood and just taking time so it is three, four or five years down the line before we sell a good red wine. So we think we could get the flavor of this good red grape Cabaernet Sauvignon and make it like a white wine and sell it in a year. We started doing that and it is a very good seller for us. We do that quite a lot and we do make a red wine, we make all of them. That is the way it was started and it's a very nice soft fruity wine that many casual wine drinkers that aren't into a lot of wine drinking, like.

PL: Can you describe to us the precess?

Mr. B: After the grapes are picked our operation has a machine to pick the grapes, and we pick most of them by machine, the machine picks one row at a time and pickes an acre an hour. By the way, it replaces 65 men. It has a great advantage in that we can pick at night, and bring the fruit in while it is cool and this ensures flavor and freshness. So thats the first step. They are brought to the winery and the first operation at the winery is called a crusher-stemmer and the grapes are dumped into this and it removes the stems and foreign material that gets into the field with the plants, and this machine crushes each grape just a little bit. It has rubber rollers in the tank and it does not really squeeze the grape. The white grape is put over the press and there are many kinds of presses, it puts pressure on the grape and squeezes the juice out and the juice is put into stanless steel tanks or sometimes into a barrel but in general now adays it is put into stainless steel. At that time it is treated so that it will kill all the natural yeast that all grapes have. There are many types of yeast, some of them do one thing and some do other things. Some live in high alcohol content, some in low content, some live in sugar so that what you are trying to do then is to kill all the natural yeast and allow the wine to sit over night , then it is taken off the top so that all of the dregs have settled to the bottom and you start with a nice clean fresh juice and

almost sterile because you have killed all the yeast by using sulphur-dioxide. Then you introduce a day later this sulphur ? wine and it is ready to be innoculated and yoou pick a yeast that has been cultivated and so forth that will fit the particlar job in this work.There are two or three yeasts that are used in general and this is for the specific wine. That yeast in indroduced and fermintation starts. In order to make a very fine white wine we have tanks that the wine is put into that are jacketed and they have glycol in the jacket of the tank to keep to keep it at a constand low temperture. We never allow the temp. to go over 60 degrees because that would prevent any taste of burning that a higher temp would create. It comes off a nice and fresher wine. After it goes to fermentation it takes longer at the lower temp., I'm describing a white wine now, and when it gets to the point that is called fermented out,its now at the point where it is as far as you want to to with it, then you start clearifying by taking off the top on the wine and this is called rafting. You take the wine off three or four times or what is necessary to really clarify that wine and then some wines are put into oak barrels so they geat the oak taste and it adds a little age to the wine, and it can breathe in this oak and it makes a better product. After it gets to the point that they feel it is ready to bottle, it is bottled, it is filtered once through a very fine filter that would be similar to a

cigarette filter that takes very thing foreign out including the yeast and it goes into the bottle and it's very sparkly and clean by this time. Yet it has all the flavor components which filtering too many times will take out of it that rafting does not. It is then labeled and corked and foiled and all the things for sale. We have machines that do all this.

PL: How many people are involved in this process?

Mr. B: It is quite machanical in the bottleing process, yes, there are people because we have the handle the bottles and put them on but the corks are put in by machine. The foil is by machine, label by machine, and these machines require four or five people to operate it. Thats the way it is done and then in certain wines they have to age for awhile in the bottle for some reason. When wines are first put into the bottles they taste fine but for a short time they loose their flavor, it flattens out, it can be very disappointing when you open a bottle the next day and taste it, but for some unexplained reason, a temporary shock,maybe, but in 30 to 45 days that flavor comes back.

PL: Along with this process you described, is Mr. Brown tasting?

Mr. B: Thats right, he is watching all during this process. The loss of control is very prevalent with wine, you can't add anything to the wine, you can't treat it or put sugar in

it, or water, you can't do a lot of things, but there are certain processes and certain things that you can do that would help that wine and so if it appears that has too much sulphur dioxide which you use to kill the yeast the first time, that will taste like rotten eggs and then you can taste it in the wine. There are certain processes that you can do to prevent that and the sooner the better. There is also other things that can happen in the wine if there is resedual sugar and it starts to ferment again, they can pick that up too, things that I don't even understand that the winemaker can pick up on. All during this process, they are watching very closely as the wine progresses. Winemakers like to tell the story that probably the best wine anyone ever made never happens, mistakes can happen and that is the reason for the winemaker to fix these problems.

PL: At what point were you with the winery when Mr. Davidge died?

Mr. B: We were in production and were doing quite well, he did not see us get into the marketing as much as I would have liked. He was very interested in everything but we had just started selling on the market, but he did not get a chance to see that, he never got to see our gold medal and he would have loved that.

PL: But the Davidge family is in the business?

Mr. B: Yes, all the children are active and help us. They are full partners in the business from the vines through the finished product. But we have other partners in the winery itself. We operate with one set of equipment, we do everything jointly.

PL: You mentioned your gold medal?

Mr. B: The Los Angeles County Fair, but that was about two years after we started production as it takes that long for the process. It was a first year wine but a second year of the winery.

PL: And was that a nice surprise?

Mr. B: Yes, it was a tremendous surprise! Because it.... really when you are a small winery and out of a new area and competing with the giants, every one wants to win and every one competes at Los Angeles. There were 500 wines in that competetion.

PL: Is this an annual event?

Mr. B: Yes, and when you are in there you want it all. So for a little inexperienced business that we were to win that prise, it was really shocking and since that time we have becme very bold, and I suppose a little cocky as we will compete any where because we know we produce a quality product that can compete and we do win more than our share of metals.

PL: Do you have someone who takes the wines to these competetions?

Mr. B: Yes, our sales people, they enter the wines. It is costly and you have to pay a fee to enter and supply a half case for each competetion. So it does cost money but the publicity is wonderful. All these are written up in the newspapers and wine magazines.

PL: Tell me about your staff?

Mr. B: The staff is small, we have the winemaker, Mr. Brown, and an assistant, Allan Baris, then a secretary, and a girl who runs the testing room, then we have casual help that comes in on occasions. It is really the four main people that are there every day. In the vineyard we are the same way, that we hire up to 100 people a year but a very short time during picking or pruning. Now we have 8 men pruning and as soon as that is finished we won't have anyone for three or four months.

End of Side 1, Tape 1

Begin Side 2, Tape 1

PL: I wanted to ask you about the new immigration bill passed by the U.S. Congress recently?

Mr. B: It will not bother us, it will probably help temporarily. I think that many people do not understand the Mexican immigration into the U.S., and the help that

they provide us. We hire them to do a lot of our work that we can not get locals to do. The locals do not want to prune vines. I will hire anyone I can. We hire a lot of Mexicans, some with papers and some not. I have to admit that (laughter) but this would legalize and help take the scare of the authorities from the Mexicans so they can do the work for us, but what I see happening in the future, and I really don't know how we are going to ovaer come this is that there is a gareat demand for these people in many industries other than vineyards. They will seek employment in other places like restaurants, bakeries, where the work is easier. We pay more than those places but the work is out in the fields and they tend to go to the easier jobs. I don't know how it will effect me personally in the short run. Many of my people have been working for me for years and now it will be OK and they can become citizens. In the long run, I don't know.

PL: You try to hire the same people year after year?

Mr. B: Yes, we do. Another thing that is hard to recognize is that these people come to us with a valid Social Security number and that says they are legal sometines they are and sometimes not. They get forged papers that look so authentic that it takes an expert to detect the difference. Immigration say they can't tell the difference either. You try to take time to study their

cards. It is difficult to separate them out. I think thats going to be the same in the future. There are many, many ways to deceive the government if you and hungry and these people are!

PL: And pruning take a special skill?

Mr. B: Yes, it takes a special skill and the more knowledgable these people are the better it is for us. We will pay more money to get a good job done. We try to hire the same people that we have had for years. What we have done is to try to over come this seasonal thing, by trading with a farmer down in Goleta, he uses the people for the lemons during the Spring and Summer, then they come here for picking in the Fall and stay thru March for the pruning. Then they go back to the Goleta area for avacados and lemons.

PL: Then you do have pickers for some grapes?

Mr. B: Yes, some varieties that the winemaker likes to have picked and in general they are the red grapes because they ferment on the skin, they don't want them crushed, so they are hand-picked. Then they are put through the crusher stemmer but they don't want them crushed in the field. Sometimes the mechanical picker does crush them a little. We have overcome that somewhat and we do most of our with a machine in small lots so they don't stay in the fields to long.

PL: What are your specific duties?

Mr. B: My duties are to grow the grapes, so I supervise the growing of the grapes.

PL: Are you out every day checking on things?

Mr. B: Pretty much, we have some leisure time and it is much less demanding then the dairy business where we had 365 days of constand work. We had a period in the fall now when just before harvest when we are busy checking to make sure of the maturity of the grapes but the work has really shut down. We don't irrigate for about 60 days before harvest, we don't cultivate, we don't do much of anything, we are just waiting for the maturity of the grapes and so that is a more casual time for us. Then the other little vacation that we have is right after harvest. Harvest is an all consuming affair, lots of hours and night work but after the middle of October we are free until the middle of December because we are waiting for the frost to knock the leaves down before we start to prune.

PL: Do you have to fertilize?

Mr. B: Very little, a grape plant is very deep rooted and the plant survives without an awfully lot of nutrients in the soil unless you have a very deficient soil to start with. The grape's consumption of nitrogen is about 50 units per acare which is a very small for any plant. A lawn takes more than that. Grapes take a very mall amount of

nutrients from the soil and what we do is put back all the leaves that fall back into the soil so we are improving the ground as we go.

PL: When we started this interivew, you mentioned that soil is not the only thing to look for in starting a vineyard?

Mr. B: Many believe that centain soils are needed to produce good grapes of high quality but during this time that we were thinking of planting, extensive work was being done ;by the University of California in France, studying where these grapes grew and whay and what influenced the quality and what they found was that one farmer on the top of a hill said his crop grew the best there, and then another farmer said he grew the best quality on the side of the hill, while another farmer said at the bottom of the hill, in flat land was best. Each described a different soil, and pretty soon it started coming together that it was the temperture differences, climate differences, that was the main thing. So then they started keeping track of tempertures. We have a strange situation here in this valley in that we do have some warm tempertures during the day time in summers but we have this factor of very cool nights and so the average temperture is what is important. It is not unusual to have a 45 to 50 degree temperture difference. This is an unusual situation that not many places have. Thats the one thing that allows us to grow these good grapes, the cooler climate.

PL: This year has been cold, will this hurt your crop?

Mr. B: No, actually we enjoy having really cold weather during the dormant period. We like them to go completely dormant. The plants are very vunerable to frost. We would like a lot more rain.(laughter)

PL: You have a sprinkler system for frost control?

Mr. B: Yes, in all the fields and we are very fortunate in that by chance we live on the main line of Cachuma to Solvang, so we get Cachuma water. So we irrigate our whole place at one time. There is enough pressure that we don't have to depend on pumps, that's a real problem, depending on pumps. If the electricity goes off and the water stops during a storm, we could loose everything to frost. All we have to depend on is me getting out of bed to turn on the water (laughter).

PL: You don't have wells?

Mr. B: Oh yes, during the Hunts time there were water wells. We hooked on to Cachuma when we put in the grapes. Each block of 15 to 20 acres has it's own pipes in blocks and it is all metered to 50-60 pounds pressure. The sprinklers are small, they emit about 1/4 inch an hour so the water comes on very slowly and it penetrates deeply.

PL: With the competetion that has grown up with more and more vineyards in this area, do you find it difficult to make a

living?

Mr. B: No, it has been a great advantage for us, we have been very fortunate for several reasons in that our area has gained a good name. All our wineries have created a good reputation, all have been good produters. Excellent people to work with, they are proud of their product so this has helped. We could have had some sloppy ones that had not done so well but we didn't. The other thing is that we live a day's drive from Los Angeles and the people come up here in a half day to enjoy the area and go through our wineries. They would not be very likely to drive this far for one winery. Even if they don't buy at our winery, they do visit and will remember when they get home that they did come to our place and buy at a store that carries our wine. The other producers have been a help not a hinderance. The relationship between all the growers is excellent and we are always in touch with each other. I happen to be one of the oldest and have had lots of questions asked of me, and I hope I have helped others. They are very good to me.

PL: What do you foresee for this valley?

Mr. B: I see that we will probably grow some, we will never be a large winery outfit that is not our desire to do so. We would like to be a little bit larger so we could become more efficient in our production but I see us as a smaller good quality winery. I see most of the operations in the

valley being that way. I think all of us would be in somewhat of being a little larger, Firestone is our largest. I see Gainey getting a little larger. All of us would like to get up to a point of efficience that would operate well. That would be in the 20 to 50 thousand cases of wine per year and most of the wine will be produced from grapes grown here in the valley and I can see additional plantings in the future. 100 acres of grapes and a small winery on the premise is the way it will continue in this area.

PL: Have you thought of buying more land?

Mr. B: No, actually not, we feel the land we now have planted is a good balance, the right amount of grapes for one manager to care for, of the property to care for and we are at a time when I see other plantings might exist in the area that we would buy their grapes. That would give us a little choice in buying another type that would blend in with ours rather than grow ourselves.

PL: Are you making money?

Mr. B: Well, it takes a lot of investment, it takes a lot of time to perfect all these things and we are to the point now where we can make a little bit of money from our vineyard. It's established, it's in production, it is not very profitable, in agriculture it shows some promise, the winery itself, we are still in the development stage there

and we are doing things that we are able to break even and we would hope to make a few dollars. Our objective is to have a good place to sell our grapes at a good price. Thats exactly what we do, we sell the grapes to ourselves. We pay a good price and if the winery operations cover all expernsives and breaks even that is satisfactory. If it could make a little money that would be alright too. The objective is to make the whole unit work so we have a good place to seel our grapes for a good price.

PL: So there isn't a lot of pressure?

Mr. B: Well...yes, there is because we are in an over supply of wine and grapes in this state, in the world, so competetion is tough and so youy have to stay on your toes and be up on things all the time because it is always easier to loose customers than gain, so you pay attention to the constant change. Average is not good enough. I suppose that the one thing that is a continuing thing is the surprise to me to go to a rastaurant and find your wine on the shelf. It is interesting and you don't think about it until you come upon that event. We do not go in for world wide distribution, we have some for out of state but the other thing is that even at home we go to a reataurant and the waitress discribes our wines and she does a good job of it without knowing who we are. The other thing that is different to us is that we enjoy having been in agriculture all of our lives and we are

used to selling a product such as a man sells grain. Barley today is worth about $5.00 a hundred and whether you have the best barley in the world or the worst it does not really make all that difference but we are in an industry that is different and the product and effort does make a big difference, the price does not have to be the same and the demand is not the same so we have a whole new outlook in marketing, we are more a retailer than a farmer so that our efforts are rewarded and it does make a difference, so it is a change for us.

PL: Thank you mr. Bettencourt, for this interview.

End of tape.